

Frank Smith
Field Representative, Narcotics Education

Frank Smith grew up in a middle-class household in Gloucester County, New Jersey, located in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He was "a typical kid," he says, athletic and friendly.

Frank began experimenting with alcohol in the sixth grade, because his "friends were doing it...it was the big thing at that age," he says. But what had started out as an occasional weekend activity eventually became far more serious, as he moved on from beer to harder liquor.

Frank began smoking marijuana in the tenth grade. A football injury that year ended Frank's athletic career. With his newfound free time, he began spending his after-school hours with drug users.

Marijuana soon became a gateway for drugs with more serious consequences, like cocaine and methamphetamine. By his senior year, unbeknownst to his family, Frank was skipping school and using heavily. He lacked enough credits to graduate, but by vowing to attend summer school, he was permitted to walk in the graduation ceremony. His family did not know that the diploma sleeve he received was empty.

After high school, Frank followed a friend to an aeronautical school in Oklahoma. He flunked out and began using again within a year. After an arrest for drug use at a concert and a subsequent brief, hours long stint in jail, Frank decided to move home and get his life back on track.

But his one last big rendezvous with drugs would change his life forever. While intoxicated and high on meth, Frank climbed a tree and fell headfirst forty feet to the ground. He woke up from being in a coma eight weeks later and learned that he had broken his pelvis and jaw, and suffered severe brain damage, which would prevent him from living his life the way most take for granted.

Frank, at age 22, was wheelchair-bound for life. "Most people think that death is the worst thing that can happen to you," he says. "But to go from a really active life to a

very limited life, that's the worst thing that can happen to you." Frank may have deserved prison for his activities, but with Traumatic Brain Injury, there's no Parole.

After four months of physical therapy at a rehabilitation center and surgeries on his brain and eyes, Frank went home and faced the harsh reality of the consequences of his accident. He became increasingly depressed and began drinking to numb his pain. He considered suicide on several occasions.

Frank's brother watched him spiral downward into depression and drug abuse, and suggested that Frank, who never attended those summer courses, work toward

obtaining his high school diploma. Frank enrolled in a GED program and successfully completed it. Inspired by his friend Edward Hudak, who was wheelchair-bound due to a bout with polio, Frank enrolled at Gloucester County College. He was elected president of the student body, and he graduated in 1990 with an associate's degree in liberal arts.

During college, Frank volunteered at local schools as a motivational speaker. He became a full-time employee of the Gloucester County Department of Human Services after graduation.

As the featured speaker for Project Aware, Frank has reached over 47,000 kids and teenagers across southern New Jersey. Through the example of his life experiences he shares his message of the negative, and often permanent,

results of drug use.

He also provides a positive message to empower the youth to make good choices. Frank continues to visit area schools to share his very personal, true, and affecting story. He is in the process of creating a video, which details his struggle with drugs and the life that he currently leads.

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